AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL MARTIN

Prime Minister and Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada



1) As you know, the Canadian population is increasingly diverse. Many wonder if that diversity is being reflected in our elected institutions. Can you please give us some idea of the diversity of your caucus? For example, how many women, immigrants, visible minorities, and Aboriginal peoples were elected in your party in the last federal election?

As leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, few questions give me more pleasure in answering than this one. The question also comes at a perfect time. Lately we've been hearing a lot from the official opposition about the diversity of their membership – a claim that frankly mystifies me. The Liberal Party is by far the most diverse party in the House of Commons. Thirteen Members of our caucus are visible minorities. That's just under ten per cent, which is well above the average for the House overall. And as for representation of women, I am at once both proud of our performance and determined to do better. Today, women represent 25 per cent of our caucus, more than any other party though, frankly, to my mind, still not enough. We can and will do better.

That said, the Liberal Party still does much better than any other federal party on both of these fronts – a greater ethnic and immigrant representation and much stronger voice for women *within* our parliamentary caucus. The Liberal Party has made many great strides in its long history, but I'd have to say that drawing these diverse voices *inside* the machinery of political discourse must rank as one of our greatest achievements.

2) What measures have your party taken to involve immigrants and minorities as party members, electoral candidates, and MPs? Are these measures working? Does more need to be done?

Indeed, more needs to be done. One of the greatest strengths of this country is its diversity, in terms of ethnicity and culture, and heritage. It stands to reason that any federal party that strives to represent this county must strive to be just as diverse.

In terms of gender representation, I believe we must do better. However, I take pride in the fact that only the Liberal party has a permanent agency, our National Women's Liberal Commission, specifically mandated to represent the interests of women and to encourage their participation in the political process. We are also the only federal party with a meaningful affirmative action program to support women candidates, the Judy LaMarch Fund, which provides support to Liberal women candidates.

In terms of encouraging ethnic diversity, this Party's position could not be more clear. Our party's constitution is unequivocal. All are eligible for membership, regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, colour or religion. Anybody who understands Liberals will know these rules are entirely consistent with our core principles – the value and dignity of each individual man and woman. Supporting that dignity, giving it voice in our society, is the highest calling of any political party.

Our constitution also provides guidance in the question of diversity. Campaign committees are specifically directed to consider questions of gender equity and minority representation in the conduct of their business. I don't think a Party could be more explicit in its support of diversity than that.

3) Research suggests that in order to secure a party's nomination, immigrants and minorities need to have more education, more experience and deeper roots in their communities. Given that in order to run, a candidate must first be nominated, how do you ensure that immigrants and minorities are able to participate equitably in nomination contests?

Recruiting the kinds of candidates that can best represent their community is always of paramount concern to any political party. As with so many other areas that speak to our party's diversity, I know we'd like to do more. Being the most ethnically diverse party in the House of Commons is something to be proud of, certainly. But we must not allow ourselves to become complacent about it, and I don't think we have. I've already touched on our Party's constitutional imperative to seek diversity in our candidates. That has helped get us where we are today. But the work will continue, and this party has demonstrated time and again its commitment to see that work through.

Just this spring, at our national policy convention, we passed a resolution urging the government to celebrate diversity in Canada's communities. The resolution outlines specific ways in which this should be done, programs and funding methods. It would be easy for a party like ours, a party already so clearly identified with multiculturalism, to rest on its laurels. But we clearly are not and that makes me very proud.

4) Outside of the electoral arena, how does your party involve a diverse range of Canadians in, for example, consultation activities or the setting of party policy? What challenges do you face in trying to reflect the interests of some many individuals?

The example I just mentioned is probably the best example I can give you of how the Liberal Party of Canada is so inclusive. That resolution, urging the government of celebrate diversity, was brought to our policy convention by our party members from Manitoba. It was an excellent resolution and I applaud their work. But it was a resolution that I would not have been surprised to see from any part of this country and for a simple reason: if you are a Liberal and a Canadian, you know both the power and the value of multiculturalism. I've mentioned the diversity of our caucus. Well that is just the tip of the iceberg. In party organizations, on committees, in workshops, rural and urban communities across this country, there is no party as diverse as the Liberal Party.

So obviously there are extraordinary challenges we face in trying to reflect all these views. How we do it is another matter, but the answer is probably no more complicated than to ask you to visit one of our policy conventions, like the one we had this March. Thousands of people, from across Canada, expressing their views, airing their differences, coming to a consensus. It also helps that the party has instituted four separate commissions, one each for women, youth, seniors and Aboriginal Canadians, all of which feed into the party's policy process.

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It this a challenge? Of course it is. But it's a challenge the Liberal Party welcomes.

5) As you know, any resident of Canada can participate in the nomination of a candidate for an election. As such, party politics brings together both citizens and non-citizens, and the media focused much attention on this issue during the last federal election. Some observers suggested that the involvement of non-citizens was "undemocratic" particularly since it allowed immigrants to "pack" nomination meetings with "instant" members and "take-over" the riding. How would you address these concerns? How do you ensure that immigrants are able to participate in party politics on an equal footing with others?

As far as ensuring the involvement of immigrants in party politics is concerned, you are right in saying that participation in the system is not limited to citizens. Residency is sufficient. That's in the Liberal party's constitution. Canada is a nation built on and by immigration. This is a force that is central to our nation's history, and a force that the Liberal Party of Canada has a long tradition of supporting. Allowing our immigrants to participate in the political process of their adopted country is one way this party honours their contribution to Canada and builds the diversity and strength of the party.

6) Your party has long been viewed as the party that is most open to immigrants and diversity. Over time, however, some have suggested that there has been a retreat from some of the policies that were responsible for enforcing that view. Indeed, funding for multiculturalism has declined, and immigration levels are today lower than they were in the early 1990s. Certainly, there are other indicators of openness. What is your party doing to ensure it remains open to immigrants and diversity and promotes the ideals of multiculturalism and inclusion?

It's no accident that this party has been identified as the traditional party of immigration. Today we continue to honour that tradition. Just this spring we announced over $190 million in funding for three new initiatives that will greatly improve Canada's immigration system. This investment will shorten the waiting times for immigrant parents and grandparents seeking to be reunited with their families in Canada. It will also make it easier for international students and speed up applications for permanent residence waiting to become citizens. When judging how open we are to immigrants,

diversity and multiculturalism, I would simply ask you to judge the Liberal Party by the actions of the Liberal Government. On that evidence I don't think there's any judgment you could draw other than that the Liberal Party remains the party of immigration.

7) The Income Tax Act currently limits the amount of advocacy work that a charitable organization can undertake; many refer to this as the "10% rule." Critics argue that this provision prevents charitable organizations, including those that represent the interests of immigrants and minorities, from participating meaningfully in the political process. How would you respond? Are there other ways that charitable organizations can influence the political process?

The federal rules governing the political activities of charitable groups have been carefully worked out through extensive consultations and the offices of Elections Canada. The result has been regulations designed to serve the interests of both the voluntary sector and the public.

That said, your question presupposes that charitable groups are the only way immigrants and minorities influence the political process. As we've already discussed, that's obviously not the case.

I wouldn't presume to advise charities on how to achieve greater influence. The voluntary sector in this country is too inventive to need my counsel. I *would* say that I'm confident immigrants and minorities in Canada will always have an important role in the political process, just as they have, and will continue to have, within the Liberal Party of Canada.